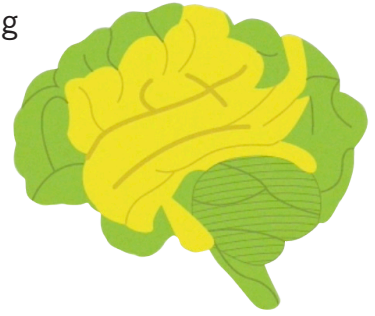


What is Prevention?

The earlier someone starts using substances, the greater their chances of developing a substance use disorder; *ninety percent of adults with a substance use disorder (SUD) started using alcohol or drugs before they turned 18.*

Prevention efforts focus on delaying the age of first drug or alcohol use, or pushing it back as long as possible, whether alcohol, tobacco or marijuana—the most commonly used substances among teens.



The Adolescent Brain

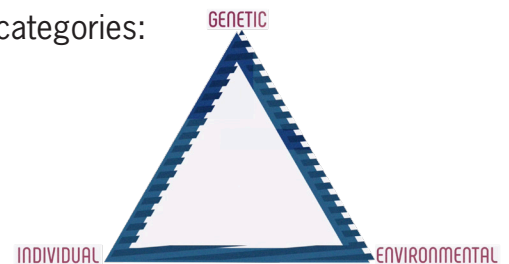
The adolescent brain is in an amazing phase of rapid development—learning and growing all of the time. This is why it's easier for young people to learn an instrument or speak a new language than it is for adults, but it also makes the adolescent brain more vulnerable to injury—including the harmful effects of alcohol and drugs. The brain continues to rapidly develop until a person is in their early to mid 20s, with the regions of the brain that control emotions and impulses and help us make decisions among the last to develop. This is why adolescents are more likely to take risks and make impulsive decisions, such as trying drugs and alcohol in the first place. Protecting the brain during this period of development is crucial to a person's overall health and dramatically reduces the risk of developing a substance use disorder later in life.

Risk & Protective Factors

As with many other diseases, vulnerability to substance use disorder (SUD) differs from person-to-person, and no single factor determines whether someone will become addicted to alcohol or drugs. In general, the more risk factors a person has, the greater the likelihood that using substances will lead to a SUD.

The risk factors associated with substance use disorder fall into 3 main categories:

- **Individual**
- **Environmental**
- **Genetic**



Individual factors that put an adolescent at risk besides the age of first use include parental substance use, trauma, and a lack of social attachments.

Environmental factors include high drug availability, poverty, and exposure to violence.

Research suggests that genetic factors account for about half of a person's likelihood of developing a SUD. While we can't change our genetics, knowing about a family history of SUD can help empower us to make different decisions about our substance use.

For every risk factor, there is a protective factor to counter-balance it. Prevention focuses on strengthening the protective factors that we can control to decrease the likelihood that a person or community will struggle with addiction.

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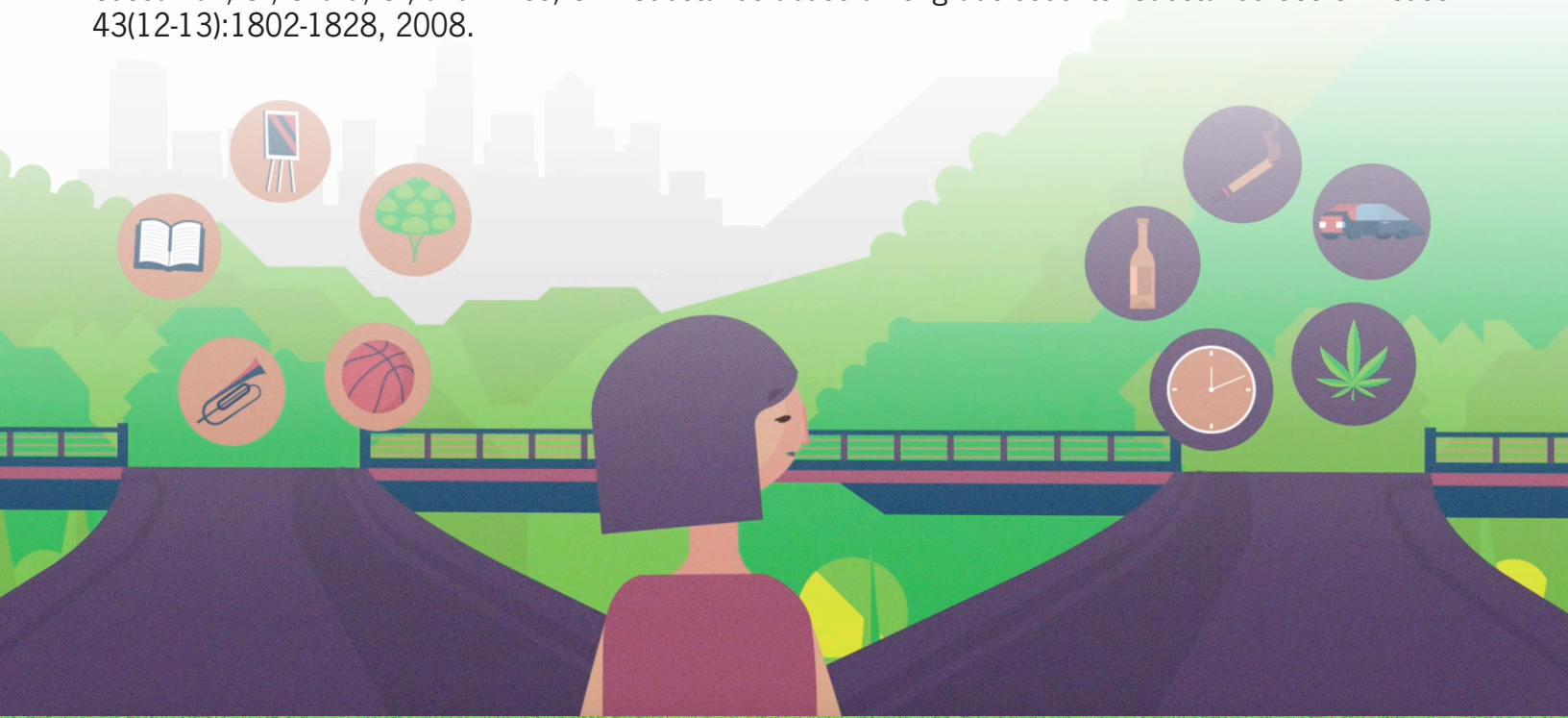
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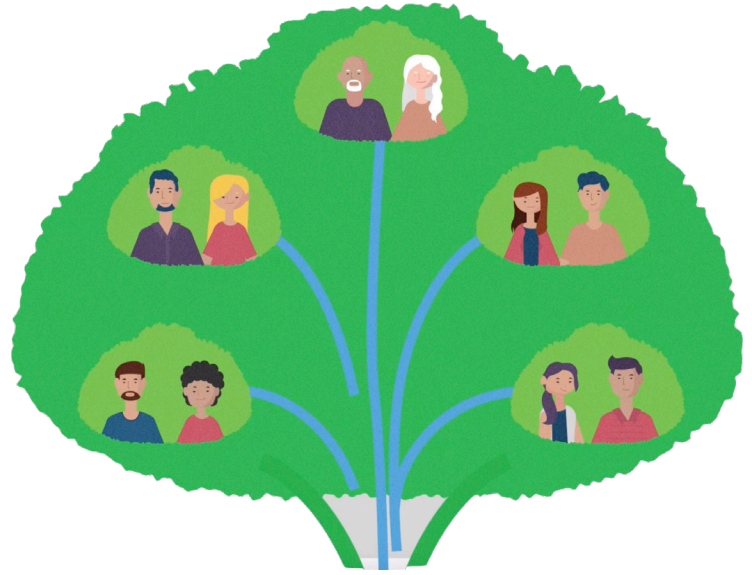
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What is Prevention? The Role of Genetics

Substance use disorders can run in families. Research suggests that **genetics account for about 1/2 of a person's likelihood of developing a substance use disorder.**

Genes are the functional units of our DNA that direct the development and expression of every cell in our bodies. Some diseases, such as sickle cell anemia or cystic fibrosis, are caused by a "mutation" in a single gene. But many diseases, such as cancer, heart disease, and substance use disorder, involve variations in many different genes that contribute to a person's overall level of risk and are also profoundly influenced by lifestyle and individual choices.



While we can't change our genetics, knowing about family history of addiction empowers us to make different decisions about using addictive substances. But because of the stigma surrounding this disease, many families have kept experiences with addiction a secret and sometimes even from one another for fear of being judged or discriminated against.

Information is power when it comes to genetic risk. Be honest with young people if they have a familial history of addiction and help them reduce their risk of developing a substance use disorder, by doing things like:

- **Delaying substance use until your brain has matured.**
- **Learning skills to help you cope with stress and express emotions in a healthy way,**
- **and practicing ways to refuse drugs or alcohol if they are offered to you.**



Caregivers can help to strengthen protective factors for a young person who has a genetic risk for addiction by

- **setting clear expectations around no alcohol, tobacco, or drug use,**
- **helping them to find and pursue activities they're passionate about, such as music, sports, or art,**
- **and investing in resilient, healthy communities where young people can thrive and feel a sense of belonging.**



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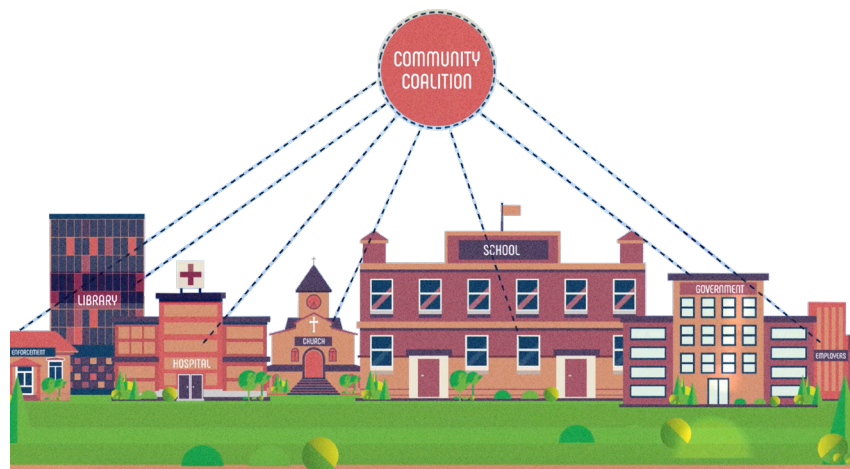


What is Prevention? The Role of the Community

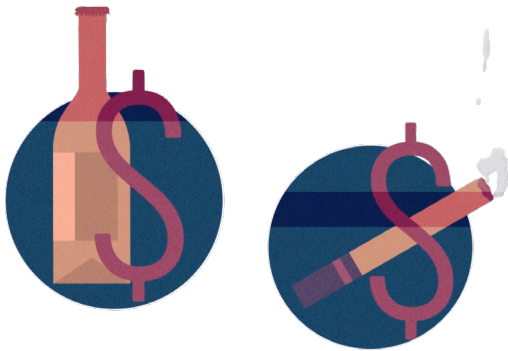
Prevention efforts focusing on the environment aim to build communities that protect adolescents from early substance use. All of the key sectors within a community come together to build comprehensive strategies that reduce *risk factors* for substance misuse and addiction, such as high rates of poverty, social norms and drug availability, and counterbalances them with *protective factors*, such as community engagement and healthy activities.

Coalitions build partnerships between key sectors to support overall community health and increase the likelihood that young people will live lives free of addiction. These strategies vary based on the unique needs of a particular community, and can include:

- **changing social norms around substance use through awareness campaigns,**
- **educating people of all ages about the disease of addiction**
- **teaching adults how to recognize the signs of substance use and intervene if a young person is struggling.**



Prevention efforts can also include policies that decrease drug availability – like imposing taxes on alcohol and tobacco, regulating prescribing practices, and increasing access to evidence-based treatments. Other efforts focus on improving the places where young people spend their time— like schools, public parks, libraries, churches, shopping malls— to promote attachment and community engagement, which reduces the likelihood of substance use.



Researchers have found that implementing proven prevention policies would save the US billions of dollars annually.

More importantly, **prevention saves lives** and supports healthy communities.

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